



M E D I A R E L E A S E

STATE OF TENNESSEE
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CHILD IMMUNIZATION RATES AT AN ALL-TIME HIGH TENNCARE PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN SUCCESS

CHATTANOOGA—Tennessee's childhood immunization rate reached an all-time high in 2001. Last year, 88.2 percent of two-year-olds in the state received all of the recommended vaccinations against seven diseases: measles, mumps, rubella, pertussis, tetanus, diphtheria and polio. The rate of fully vaccinated children rose from 87.7 percent in 2000.

In 1995, Tennessee began a statewide effort to increase immunizations through a number of aggressive measures such as: implementing an immunization registry to send reminders to parents when immunizations are due; creating private partnerships to increase public awareness; sending a congratulatory card to each new mother in Tennessee, which includes important immunization information; requiring Families First participants to have their children immunized as a condition of participation; working through the Women, Infants and Children nutritional program to improve the immunization status of program participants and implementing the Vaccines for Children program in Tennessee which provides \$8.5 million worth of free vaccines to private physicians for eligible children each year.

TennCare has also helped to boost immunization levels. While immunization rates for children on TennCare were slightly lower than privately insured children last year, the difference is considerably smaller than it was under the Medicaid program.

In 2001, completion rates for TennCare enrollees were 86.3 percent compared to 90.4 percent for privately insured children. Prior to implementation of the TennCare program in Tennessee, children on Medicaid had completion rates almost 20 percent lower than children not on the program. The survey also shows that the difference in rates among white and black children is closing significantly. Immunization rates for black children were only slightly lower than the rates for white children—85.5 percent compared to 88.7 percent.

Immunization rates varied significantly across the state. Sullivan County had the highest vaccination rate (94 percent), while southeastern Tennessee had the lowest rate (79.3 percent). The difference in rates across the state shows that there are still areas of the state where far too many children are unprotected against potentially deadly diseases. Low immunization rates could result in disease outbreaks in those areas, state officials warned.

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Federal funding for immunization programs has decreased over the past four years, making it more difficult to increase public awareness of the need for children to get all of the recommended vaccinations. Despite the reductions in funding, Tennessee will continue to expand its efforts to raise immunization levels to 90 percent. This year, the department will work toward expanding the immunization registry database to capture more immunization histories of children on TennCare to allow the area health departments to assist private providers by providing follow-up activities for these children.

Since 1983, the Tennessee Department of Health has conducted an annual survey on random samples of resident births for a specific month to determine the percentage of children who have had at least four doses of diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis vaccine; three doses of polio vaccine and one dose of measles/mumps/rubella vaccine by their second birthday. Completion rates for H. influenzae type b, hepatitis B and varicella vaccines are also examined.

State officials point out that vaccines are the most powerful and cost-effective way to prevent infectious diseases in children. While vaccines have reduced or eliminated many diseases that once routinely killed or disabled thousands of children each year, diseases such as measles, mumps and pertussis still exist. State health experts say children need to get all of their recommended vaccinations; otherwise, they will be at risk for potentially deadly infections when they could easily be protected against them.

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